

# SUNDAYBUSINESS



Mati Rodriguez, a client at Dress for Success’ Belle Glade office. For women, she says there are few retail stores in her community that provide work-appropriate clothing. RACHIDA HARPER SKINNER/PALM BEACH POST

## Dress for Success clothes women with confidence

Nonprofit provides professional wear

**Rachida Harper Skinner**  
Palm Beach Post  
USA TODAY NETWORK

BELLE GLADE — It’s been hard to find a job in Belle Glade since the Great

Recession. It’s even harder to find something appropriate to wear to a job interview. And so Mati Rodriguez’s eyes lit up the day the perfect outfit materialized right in front of her.  
A turquoise button-up. Black slacks. Block heels. And accessories to complement.  
“I love this. I feel wonderful,” Rodriguez told the stylist with Dress For Suc-

cess, the nonprofit that has brought its mission of providing lower-income women with professional wear to The Glades.  
At the corner of South Main Street and Southeast Avenue K, Dress for Success shares an office building and a common goal with CareerSource Palm Beach County, an organization that works to reduce unemployment in the

community with a job-search database, job fairs and job-readiness workshops.  
Those connections, which include the neighboring Dress for Success, can be especially valuable in The Glades, where the unemployment rate is far higher than in the county as a whole.  
About 20% of Belle Glade’s 16,698  
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Jakob Lorz is the owner of Lorz Automotive, an auto repair shop he opened in Seattle earlier this March. A shortage of skilled car mechanics has him working solo 12-hour days, six or more days per week, to meet demand. BETTINA HANSEN/SEATTLE TIMES/TNS

## Looking for a good mechanic? Odds are your garage is, too

**Paul Roberts**  
The Seattle Times  
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

SEATTLE – When Mike Zebley took a job delivering tools to Seattle-area car shops this year, he quickly learned that what most of his customers needed wasn’t tools so much as people who knew how to use them.  
Nearly every shop on Zebley’s route was so hard-up for skilled mechanics that many promised Zebley up to \$1,000 for anyone he could recruit. Despite the incentive, however, Zebley hasn’t been able to deliver a single mechanic. “Everybody that I go to needs techs,” he said. “They’re pretty desperate.”  
Stop by any Seattle-area garage, car dealership, or body shop and you’ll like-

ly hear a similar take on one of the region’s labor crunches.  
Demand for repairs and maintenance is rebounding from the pandemic. But many garages are so short-staffed they’ve had to delay work or send customers elsewhere – despite, in some cases, offering hefty signing bonuses and six-figure salaries for experienced candidates.  
“I would hire two guys today,” said Charles Jung, manager at Fix Auto Collision in Seattle, where lack of staff means about \$40,000 in forgone business every month.  
At Jakob Lorz’s recently opened garage, he now has enough business to add a mechanic, but can’t find any.  
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## EEOC failing Black workers

**Nick Penzenstadler**  
USA TODAY

A noose in the workplace and a string of racist commentary were the final straw for Los Angeles juvenile corrections worker Darren Gales.  
A trained equal employment opportunity instructor, Gales gathered his evidence and lodged official complaints with the nation’s anti-discrimination agency, expecting swift accountability against his longtime employer.  
That was four years ago. To his chagrin, the agency created in the image of

civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr. punted his complaint into a low-priority case management system even after he provided photos, affidavits, recordings, witness statements and a mountain of records.  
Managers set up that system decades ago to triage a crush of discrimination claims that threatened to overload the mission of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Since then, they’ve adopted a strategy to prioritize cases. Discrimination claims that involve new  
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Juvenile corrections worker Darren Gales wanted accountability after he says he found a hangman’s noose left for him at work. HARRISON HILL/USA TODAY



**Alexandra Clough**  
Columnist  
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### Editor’s note

Alexandra Clough is on vacation. Her column will return on Sept. 26.



# Clothes

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residents currently are unemployed, said Kelly Smallridge, the president of the Business Development Board of Palm Beach County.

Tom Veenstra, vice president of administration at CareerSources, said the county’s unemployment rate is now at 4.8%, below both the 5.7% national rate and 5.1% state rate.

But The Glades’ unemployment rate is five times greater than the county’s, according to Veenstra, and it is partly due to a lack of resources for women in the community.

Smallridge cited several obstacles women have to navigate when they re-enter the workforce. Transportation – much of it on buses – is unreliable. Day-care is expensive. The economy is concentrated in a few large industries, such as agriculture, offering fewer employment choices than women can find in cities.

Besides unemployment and under-employment, the women who receive help face challenges such as poverty, homelessness, addiction recovery, and mental or physical disabilities, Dress for Success Palm Beaches executive director Mary Hart said.

Finding suitable work attire is just one more challenge.

“We are judged by what we wear, whether we like it or not, consciously or subconsciously. We are helping to level the playing field,” Hart said. “These are amazing women that we are working with – amazing women with gifts and a lot to share.”

“But if they walk (into an interview) and are not dressed appropriately, they can be immediately judged based on that and not given a fair opportunity.”

Because of a lack of retail stores in the community, women are not often given the opportunity to “dress to impress.”

Dress For Success Palm Beaches, based in Palm Springs, opened its doors

11 years before its Belle Glade location did. With the assistance of volunteers and more than 70 partner organizations, the non-profit has assisted nearly 6,000 women through its wardrobe and job readiness programs.

Hart said the Palm Springs chapter of Dress for Success has always wanted to expand westward to reach the growing need, but the push to move was prompted by CareerSource, the community partner, which told it about the available space.

“We seized the opportunity to finally make this move,” she said.

The Belle Glade location opened in May and The is open to clients every Wednesday. In the boutique-like space, one can shop with a stylist for a head-to-toe outfit, accessories and makeup for a job interview. Once hired, they can return to select a week’s worth of clothes.

Its mission is more than just to make a woman look good.

Hart, who doubles as a stylist at times, said each program that Dress for Success offers is made to help women from all walks of life – GED to Ph.D,” as she put it – “add to their toolbox” and achieve economic independence. Because of COVID-19, sessions are currently virtual.

● **Next Step:** Ages 18 to 25, 10 weeks, 2 ½-hour sessions, launched in 2013. More than 120 graduates, with 60% directly securing jobs.

● **Road to Success:** Ages 26 and older, eight weeks, 3-hour sessions, launched in 2014. Over 200 graduates, with 65% directly securing jobs.

● **Professional Women’s Group:** For graduates who seek advice on workplace issues such as financial literacy.

“We’re so much more than clothing,” Hart said.

Rodriguez, 56, learned about Dress for Success through the Glades Initiative, a nonprofit that aims to improve the delivery of health and human services in the area, that also helps residents apply for jobs. Like Dress for Success, the nonprofit also helps people apply for jobs.



**Mary Hart, the executive director of Dress for Success Palm Beaches, at the nonprofit’s new Belle Glade office, where low-income women are provided with work attire and career development tools that help them enter the workforce.**  
RACHIDA HARPER  
SKINNER/PALM BEACH  
POST

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, she worked at a local restaurant. She wants to work again.

One of her first obstacles to She said she had trouble finding professional clothes was finding a place that sells them.

Other than Goodwill and It’s Fashion, a store that caters to younger shoppers, she said that there is a limited affordable retail selection, especially for women who seek work attire.

“There’s really nothing here, now that I think about it. There isn’t,” she said.

Tammy Jackson-Moore, the founder and leader of Guardians of the Glades, says Belle Glade wasn’t always like this.

“There used to be a bustling and very active downtown community, but over time, with the economy and things changing, those stores, they left,” she said. “There have been (matters) where women, men, and children have had to go outside of the community for their shopping. It became a hardship for some people who didn’t have the transportation or the ability to get to those other locations.”

Throughout the country, 22 million people have lost their jobs, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Some layoffs were temporary. Others are permanent. The service industry, took a big hit.

In the five-year Census Bureau estimate, some of the most common jobs in which women in the Glades work are retail, health care, education, and food services.

Prior to the pandemic lockdowns, Niteria Love worked at an assisted living center, but after contracting the virus and recovering, she was too scared to return.

Guardians of the Glades, which operates food drives and provides access to COVID-19 testing sites as part of its advocacy for the community, connected Love, 33, with Dress for Success.

On a Wednesday afternoon, she took a step closer to returning to work. With the help of Hart and Jackson-Moore, Love not only walked left Dress for Success with an interview outfit but also with resume tips, interview advice, and other help.

The type of support that Dress for Success provides – fashion and work advice from other women- is encouraging, Rodriguez said.

“I think this is a great idea because you come here and you get support from the ladies,” she said. “Pretty much, it’s like going to an expensive boutique and getting a one-on-one, but if you don’t have the resources, you are able to do it anyway.”

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# EEOC

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areas of employment law, including transgender discrimination, could get priority. Traditional cases based on racial discrimination can fall to the bottom of the list.

All of these factors contribute to a secret reality: Some Black workers who complain about discrimination are being discriminated against by the EEOC itself.

That reality shows up clearly in a slice of the agency’s internal tracking data obtained by USA TODAY, which shows the scant attention claims from Black workers received in several regional offices. The information provides a small window into the highest priority cases from September 2019 to August 2020.

In many places, staff deemed few or no Black discrimination charges met its top categories by showing “strategic significance.” The data showed the offices in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Boston; and Dallas flagged only one Black discrimination case each. Chicago identified none.

Combined, those regions are home to millions of Black workers.

Problems with the triage system were highlighted by interviews with 15 current and former EEOC staffers and complainants. Several people still employed within the federal government spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution at their jobs. Others spoke openly, saying the Priority Charge Handling Procedure has run amok.

With dwindling staff, the EEOC has embraced employee incentives like time off and Subway gift cards, and punishments like delayed career advancement, to ensure investigators close cases as quickly as possible – to the point that EEOC workers say they are abandoning clear and winnable cases of racial discrimination.

Workers at the agency told USA TODAY the situation at the EEOC has become untenable for investigators, who face a dizzying matrix of priority ranking that grew from an informal quota system with an “A, B, C” grading system – a claim backed by leaked emails – alongside the whim and idiosyncrasies of district managers and the ever-present pressure to reduce backlog.

“It’s mind-boggling and disheartening,” said Brandon Washington, the EEOC investigator tasked with investigating the Gales case.

Gales took matters into his own hands, hired a private attorney and got a settlement last week just before his case was expected to go to trial before a federal judge.

Washington felt so strongly that

Gales’ case should be given the agency’s attention that he fought his supervisors – eventually lodging formal complaints with local and national officials. EEOC supervisors fired him earlier this year for “unacceptable performance” in managing his case inventory. Washington, who is Black, sees it as retaliation for his complaints.

Charles Coleman, a private attorney in New York who worked in the legal department at EEOC from 2009 to 2018, said he constantly pushed for more race cases to get attention.

“There was a very strong hesitance to pursue and litigate race-based claims,” Coleman said. “For me, as a Black man, I was disappointed. ... Our core mission was rooted in racial equality.”

EEOC leaders responded to detailed questions with a written statement from Chairwoman Charlotte Burrows, a Biden administration appointee. She wrote that “the heart of EEOC’s work is to advance equal opportunity in the nation’s workplaces.”

But she acknowledged: “Keeping up with the volume of incoming charges has always been a challenge for the agency. That challenge has become more acute as the need for our services has increased and our staffing levels have not kept pace.”

## Advent of the triage system

Formed in the crucible of the civil rights era, by the 1990s the EEOC became backlogged with so many cases that it created a triage system. Now, investigators and workers say that system squeezes out some of the very Black workers it was designed to protect.

EEOC investigators, who fielded more than 67,000 formal charges nationwide last year, are supposed to collect evidence and then determine if labor laws were broken. The agency has just under 2,000 employees and a budget of \$390 million – the smallest it has been in three decades.

The Priority Charge Handling Procedure seeks to prioritize cases most likely to find provable discrimination but puts extra emphasis on employers with systemic problems or those that can set precedents in employment law.

It can mean prioritizing “sizzle” or “hot button” cases over yet another instance of Black or brown workers being discriminated against in the workplace, investigators said.

The EEOC’s case intake personnel are the gatekeepers for aggrieved employees. Anyone who wants to file a federal lawsuit alleging discrimination against their employer must first file a charge with the agency.

About a third of the claims receive top priority help from investigators or a legal filing on their behalf. Most of the rest are given a “Notice of Right to Sue”

letters and the go-ahead to pursue private litigation on their own.

## Not true to the mission

The priority rankings for which cases get EEOC help and which don’t have strayed from their original mission, said Rae Vann, an employment lawyer who testified before Congress on behalf of the Equal Employment Advisory Council, a labor law nonprofit now known as the Center for Workplace Compliance.

“It’s obviously important to set enforcement priorities, but it’s crucially important to train investigators so that garden variety charges don’t fall through the cracks,” Vann said.

She said the EEOC also has long prioritized charges as a means to develop case law that could help protect the next generation of workers nationwide.

That can mean pushing the boundaries of LGBTQ discrimination in the wake of the Supreme Court’s 2020 Boston ruling, which extended workplace protection to employees based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

While Black workers may receive less attention in any given region, the deprioritization also could leave Asian, older or Hispanic workers without much help.

It can mean putting employers with name recognition and cache on the front burner because those cases are more likely to gain attention from the public, she said, and in turn drive wider changes.

“The name of an employer shouldn’t matter, but they’re looking at impact across an organization, industry or community,” Vann said.

“Kate and Ray’s mom and pop bodega is not going to have the same impact from a deterrent standpoint as going after a highly publicized action against Whole Foods.”

Several current and former EEOC investigators say decisions on where to focus also often reflect the whim of individual district managers.

Internal EEOC data from Dallas shows that from 2015 to 2019, Black workers in the area – which includes San Antonio and El Paso, Texas, and parts of New Mexico – have formally filed more than 7,100 discrimination claims with the agency. The district investigated and substantiated the claims in 13 of those cases, about 1 in 550.

For context, data shared with Congress and posted online on all national claims – not just Black claims – for 2019 shows the agency investigated and substantiated about 1 in 70.

## A-B-Cs of EEOC procedure

In 1995, the EEOC adopted the first version of the Priority Charge Handling Procedure, calling for case triage based

on “the likelihood of an investigation resulting in a finding of reasonable cause to believe discrimination occurred.”

Cases in the A bucket would mean discrimination likely occurred; B’s needed further investigation; and Cs would be those that likely won’t result in a finding of discrimination even with more investigation – the same rankings that exist today.

A rating of C “does not necessarily mean the claims have no merit; it is a determination about where best to apply the EEOC’s limited law enforcement resources,” a spokeswoman wrote to USA TODAY. Employees with that grade can still file a private lawsuit.

But in practice, investigators say, Cs are the end of the road for most workers.

“What does it mean to get a C? It means you’re done. We’re crushing your soul,” one current EEOC investigator told USA TODAY on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation from his supervisors.

“You fought traffic downtown ... paid \$20 for parking, came upstairs and waited an hour to speak with me,” he said. “Now you have to explain a ‘prima facie’ case even though you work at Lowe’s or do construction. And you’re facing an investigator trying to keep their inventory low. ‘Oh, you don’t have witnesses for your case? Oh, you never complained formally to your boss?’ Nothing we can do.”

The investigator said the case handling procedure has slowly created a class divide that the public never sees. For workers who lack the financial resources to hire an attorney to prepare an EEOC complaint, not getting help from the agency is a dead end.

In training material released under the Freedom of Information Act, investigators are told to prioritize cases through the system according to the national and local guidelines but provided a key reminder: “Although (the Priority Charge Handling Procedure) must take into account the agency’s limited resources, it should not be applied in a way that deprives charging parties of a fair opportunity to present their case.”

In August, EEOC officials posted the first public glimpse of the A-B-C charge categorization after pressure from Congress. Those statistics show that the commission reduced its backlog of cases by 45% in five years – from 76,000 in 2015 to 42,000 in 2020.

It also revealed that B and C charges represented 70% to 80% of all cases over the past five years. That means only a fraction of all charges receive any type of meaningful investigation by EEOC staffers.

EEOC spokeswoman Christine Nazer pointed out that even after the commission decides not to investigate, workers are free to “exercise their rights to bring a private court action.”